

Rage against the Machine: Vincenzo Agnetti's Critique of Industrial Alienation

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the work of the Milanese artist Vincenzo Agnetti (1926-1981), in particular his pieces *La macchina drogata* (1968) and *NEG* (1970). Like other Italian artists and intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s, Agnetti was concerned about the alienation caused by industrial development and consumer society, manifested in carefully designed objects of everyday use. To counteract the automatism of perception and thought that he considered the sign of alienated experience, Agnetti's artworks employed several strategies that obliged the public to attend to its thinking processes. Thus, Agnetti put in practice forms of aesthetic estrangement similar to those evoked in the same period by Gillo Dorfles and Umberto Eco to counteract the widespread loss of awareness.

Keywords

Estrangement, Industrial Design, Conceptual art, Zeroing

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1. Introduction¹

In «Form as Social Commitment», an article published in 1962, Umberto Eco wondered:

Why did the term «alienation» become so popular at the beginning of the 1960s, so long after its first appearance? [...] [The term] implies that something that is acting upon us, and on which we depend, is something totally extraneous to us, a hostile power that has nothing to do with us, an evil will that has subjugated us despite all our efforts and that someday we may be able to destroy, or at least reject, since we are ourselves and it is an «other», substantially different from what we are. (123-124)

¹ I am extremely grateful to Germana Agnetti and Bruna Soletti for sharing with me their unpublished material and memories of Vincenzo Agnetti in the summers of 2011 and 2012. The present study derives from a paper written for the seminar «Art and Text», held by Professor Kristine Stiles in the fall of 2011 at Duke University (Durham, North Carolina). I thank Professor Stiles for her invaluable comments and corrections on the manuscript. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 2011 Southeastern College Art Conference in Savannah (Georgia), in the panel «European Art and Philosophy since 1945», organized by Victoria H.F. Scott and Catherine Dossin. I thank the organizers, the participants and the audience of that session for their observations and questions.

Indeed, in this decade Italian artists, writers, theatre and film directors were deeply preoccupied by alienation, and represented its multiple faces in movies, novels and theatre productions. As examples, it is worth mentioning Michelangelo Antonioni's exploration of estranged human relationships in *L'Avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961) and *L'Eclisse* (1962); Giorgio Bassani's analysis of the disconnected Jewish identity in *Il Giardino dei Finzi Contini* (1962) and *Dietro la Porta* (1964); and Luca Ronconi's application of Brechtian estrangement in his staging of the *Orlando Furioso* in the 1969 edition of the Spoleto Festival.

The Milanese artist Vincenzo Agnetti (1926-1981) was also preoccupied by widespread alienation in modern life. In particular, Agnetti was concerned about how the overwhelming continuity of sensorial stimuli in modern society leads to the formation of mechanical habits that estrange humankind from its perceptions and emotions. As a countermeasure, he produced a body of work that upsets the expectations of the viewer about the way in which language and technology work. Through the modification of machines, the use of paradoxes, tautologies and contradictions, and the alteration of artistic techniques, Agnetti aimed at making visible the constructed nature of disciplines and institutions, and therefore to reacquaint contemporary audiences with their genuine experiences and true life conditions.

There were several causes for such widespread interest in estrangement in the Italian context of the 1960s and 1970s. Historical factors certainly forced discussions on the price of industrial development to center stage. While Italy had achieved a remarkable economic boom in the years after the end of World War II, by the mid-1960s several sectors of the population – notably students and workers – were unsatisfied with the excessive expansion of consumer society, the lack of power and economic representation of the workforce, and the absence of political change. Discontent was manifested in strikes, very often violently repressed by the police. The 1960s also saw the resurgence of neo-Fascist groups and terrorist attacks, aimed at destroying democratic institutions and establishing an authoritarian regime.

The correlation between the triumph of consumerism and widespread political violence, the two central features of this period, played themselves out in the cultural arena as well. Hence, intellectuals such as Gillo Dorfles and Umberto Eco attempted to elucidate the widespread sentiment of alienation by clarifying the concept of «estrangement» and proposing solutions to it.² For instance, Eco applauded the use of dislocated grammar in avant-garde literature as a way to distance the reader from the mystifications of language, and to encourage an active engagement in its critical assessment. On his part, Dorfles claimed that all artists should practice what he called a «diastematic art» to defamiliarize the viewers from their incessant flux of perceptions, and encourage the critical questioning of existing conditions of life.

Eco, Dorfles and Agnetti were very active in Milan, and members of the local *intelligentsia*. Eco started working in RAI in 1954 as a producer of several television shows. In these years, he became close to important members of the Milanese avant-garde, like the musician Luciano Berio, who was also friends with Dorfles. Eco left RAI in 1959 to join

² See Eco, *The Open Work*; Dorfles, *Le Oscillazioni del gusto* and Dorfles *Artificio e natura*.

the Milanese publishing house Bompiani, where he worked until 1975. Since 1963, Eco and Dorfles collaborated with the avant-garde magazine *Marcatré*. For their part, Agnetti and Dorfles belonged to the intellectual circle that revolved around the artists Piero Manzoni, Enrico Castellani, and the magazine *Azimuth*, in which they both published articles. Indeed, Dorfles mentions Agnetti in some of his articles on contemporary exhibits, but only briefly, and without any mention of their shared interest in pauses, hiatuses and interruptions of communication.³

Furthermore, and more importantly for the topic of this paper, during the 1950s and 1960s Eco and Dorfles participated in an intense debate on the value of industrial design that engaged Giulio Carlo Argan, Tomás Maldonado, and Filiberto Menna, among others.⁴ It is not a coincidence that this debate took place mostly in Milan, as in those years it was without doubt the design capital of Italy. Several of the most important design companies had their headquarters there, such as De Padova, Cappellini, Artemide, and Kartell. Renowned designers, like Bruno Munari, Achille Castiglione, Giò Ponti, Gae Aulenti, Ettore Sottsass and Vico Magistretti had studios in the city and taught in the local Politecnico. Concomitantly, Milan was also base to the most important design and architecture Italian magazines, *Abitare*, *Casabella* and *Domus*, and the home of the Triennale Exhibition of Design.

In what follows, I will analyze two works by Agnetti that alter ordinary machines, *La macchina drogata* (1968) and *NEG* (1970), and examine how Agnetti's strategy of interrupting the regular functioning of technology questions the ideological bases of industrial design. I will also elaborate on the relation between Agnetti's concern with alienation, and the contemporary analyses of estrangement by Dorfles and Eco. While it is incorrect to claim that Agnetti «materialized» or «illustrated» the theories of Eco and Dorfles, whose work he most certainly knew but never explicitly quoted, there are striking coincidences between these thinkers' and Agnetti's diagnosis of contemporary alienation. Such similarities testify to a common disquiet in the Milanese artistic and intellectual milieu of the 1960s and 1970s, and reveal its increasing skepticism towards unbridled industrial development.

2. Vincenzo Agnetti and the Poetics of «Azzeramento»

Agnetti's initial intervention in art was as an *informel* painter during the 1950s. However, he quickly became disenchanted with this artistic language, destroying all his works and turning to writing art criticism. During this time, as previously mentioned, Agnetti associated with Manzoni, Castellani, and the Milanese magazine *Azimuth*, which he helped edit.⁵ *Azimuth*, of which only two issues were published (1959 and 1960), was fundamental in connecting Italian art with what was being produced in the rest of Europe and the

³ See Dorfles, *Il divenire della critica*.

⁴ Dorfles, Eco and Menna's interventions were published in Dorfles, *Il disegno industriale* and *Le oscillazioni del gusto*; Eco, *Appunti per una semiologia*; Argan, *Progetto e destino* and *Progetto e oggetto*; Menna, *La regola e il caso*. In 1954, on the occasion of the X Triennale of Milan, an international symposium of industrial design was organized. Several philosophers, art critics and artists participated, such as Luciano Anceschi, Giulio Carlo Argan, Gillo Dorfles, Lucio Fontana, Asger Jorn, Tomás Maldonado, Enzo Paci, Walter D. Teague, Jacques Viénot, Konrad Wachsmann. The conference proceedings were published only recently in *La memoria e il futuro*.

⁵ Interview of the author with Bruna Soletti.

United States.⁶ The magazine and the gallery attached to it, *Azimuth*, also offered a space of confluence and visibility to artists disaffected by *informel*.

Azimuth was characterized not only for its wealth of color illustrations, something unusual in Italian art magazines of the time, but also for its emphasis on artists' writings. In this and other spaces, Piero Manzoni published thoughts on his own work, that of his fellow artists, criticism of contemporary aesthetics, and general historical schemes of modern art. In his later artistic practice, like Manzoni, Agnetti also bypassed the critics by providing the viewer with detailed and precise explanations of his works. In this way, he responded to the authoritative stance of powerful critics like Giulio Carlo Argan, Germano Celant and Achille Bonito Oliva, who positioned themselves as the foremost authorized interpreters of the movements they championed.⁷

Another significant contribution of *Azimuth* to Agnetti's work was the recurrent reflection on the notion of emptiness, silence, and absence that appeared in its pages and which impacted on his concept of «zeroing». In the first issue of the magazine, art critic Yoshiaki Tono (involved with the Anti-Art Movement «Han Geijutsu Undo») wrote an article titled «Spazio vuoto e spazio pieno» where he analyzed the notion of whiteness and emptiness in Oriental aesthetics. Tono claimed that in Chinese painting «white is an extraordinarily fecund uterus, from which everything is born». (n.pag.) Tono related the interest in margins and empty spaces in contemporary painting to John Cage's work on silence. Hence, he considered the void as a productive space. Traces of such views would later appear in Agnetti's oeuvre, and distinguish his criticism of traditional disciplines and institutions from what some might otherwise consider a nihilistic project. For Agnetti's zeroing is never the ending point: he did not de-articulate the institutional use of language to propose absolute silence, but to allow for the possibility of an alternative organization.

However, the only article that Agnetti published in *Azimuth* was skeptical on the expressive possibilities of art. «Primo: Non commettere atti impuri» described the late 1950s as an «empty period, with nothing to construct, even without dreams». (n.pag.) Agnetti decried culture –identified with museums, libraries, and academic conferences – as a waste of time and open to economic speculation. He also denounced critics who used their power to influence public opinion as a psychological blackmail over the artist and the audience. Finally, Agnetti condemned the avant-garde for its effort to maintain power while simultaneously criticizing the structures of art that support such power: «[avant-garde artists] are so clever that they kill two birds with one stone: they eliminate a structure and at the same time they stay afloat». (n.pag.)

Gillo Dorfles also published an article in the 1959 issue of *Azimuth*. While his diagnosis of the contemporary situation of art was as bleak as Agnetti's, Dorfles did offer some way out, one that Agnetti himself would eventually follow. In «'Comunicazione' e 'Consumo' nell'arte d'oggi», Dorfles denounced two forms of contemporary art. The first, «consumed art» (what in Greenbergian terms could be labeled as «kitsch») deteriorates the expressive qualities of the work, and proposes artworks that are produced and consumed hastily. The alternative is an «art of adumbration», namely an art destined only for the private consumption of its producer because it does not make any effort to be comprehensible. This was unacceptable for Dorfles, who urged for an interaction between artist and public. Therefore, Dorfles proposed a form of art that could achieve an «os-

⁶ For a facsimile copy of the magazine, see Meneguzzo.

⁷ For a story of the changing role of the art critic in Italy during the 1960s, see Dantini 262-307.

mosis of the artistic event between creator and public» (n. pag.), based on signs, gestures, meanings and emotions, conceived as an intelligible form of communication.

Likewise, Agnetti's art avoided both its dissolution in an art of consumerism, and its privatization in an art of adumbration. In fact, Agnetti took great pains to become comprehensible to his public by using texts that reconstruct the artist's creative process and allow the audience to repeat it. While a first contact with many of Agnetti's artworks can leave the viewer perplexed and uneasy, this initial feeling is quickly dispelled because the artist, in eloquent but accessible terms, systematically included wall texts, exhibition catalogues or articles that explained the meaning and production of the work.

Notwithstanding the importance of *Azimuth* in the development of his own poetics, Agnetti's late judgment on *Azimuth* was quite harsh:

It might be useful to focus again on the brief period of «Azimuth» as an archival operation, but this does not provide much information. It should not be recuperated, because this would deform a concluded discourse. And it should not be continued, because this would mean that today there is nothing new to do. [...]

At that time, cultural engagement was romantically urged by the fascination of engagement itself. It was linked to a gesture of clear Dada origin (Manzoni); it was related to objectual painting that fatally derived in an ascetic and mannerist decoration (Fontana and Manzoni. Castellani was doing a different research, a-dimensional and without subjective raptures). On the contrary nowadays materials, effects, polemics, inventions are no longer the instruments of research. Now the disciplines themselves are used and instrumentalized to make art. (*Dimentica* 11-12)

Agnetti backed such a critique of the art exhibited and discussed in *Azimuth* by never practicing styles similar to those displayed in the magazine. In 1962, he left Italy, and until 1967 he lived in Australia, Saudi Arabia and Argentina, working in the sector of electronic automation – these abilities will serve Agnetti well in his later artistic production, as both *La macchina drogata* and *NEG* are altered machines.

During these years of artistic silence Agnetti continued to write fervently. These texts were the material for several of his artworks and literary texts of the late 1960s and 1970s. Hence, as soon as he returned to Italy, Agnetti published an avant-garde novel, *Obsoleto* (*Obsolete*), whose frontispiece was designed by Enrico Castellani. In this text, Agnetti used normal language in experimental ways, breaking syntax, logic, grammar, punctuation and narrative. He also altered readers' expectations of the normative content and form of a book: some pages of *Obsoleto* have letters that form drawings; others distribute words unevenly on the page; and Agnetti made reading difficult by having filed the printing plate so that the letters are almost invisible.

Like *Obsoleto*, Agnetti's artworks always contain an interior interruption: the hiatus operates between the functioning of the artwork and the regular functioning of the things that make up the artwork (books, machines, texts). «Azzeramento» or «zeroing out» is the category through which Agnetti conceptualized his recurring practice of interrupting the regular functioning of language, communication and technology. To clarify such notion, Agnetti referred to his piece *Frammenti di una tavola di Dario tradotta in tutte le lingue* (*Fragments of a tablet of Darius translated in all languages*) (1973). This work includes a photographic reproduction of one of the Persepolis Elamite tablets, economic records of the reign of Darius the Great. Agnetti added typewritten sequences of numbers, the fictional «translation» of the cuneiform writing on the tablets. In Agnetti's words,

Anyone who desires to make use of language or any other discipline for the purposes of art will soon find himself forced to zero out the discipline he is using, which is to say to lead it back to its point of origin. One exploits and instrumentalizes the discipline one has chosen to use to the point of destroying its structure.

Concepts are thus reduced to pure and simple signs or signals, and the configuration of the signals forms a composition. [...] In this fragment of the Table of Darius, for example, the cuneiform words are zeroed out by depriving them of meaning and replacing them with numbers. And in so far as the meanings of the words disappear, the numbers become nothing more than the possibility of intonation. The visual part of the work is necessary if the work is to have impact upon the spectator, but at the same time it comports no illusionism. The world is no longer something to be objectualized as it is in certain operations in which the medium of the word is proposed as something self-sufficient. This is also a way of eliminating scholastic didacticism. (Agnetti, *Image of an exhibition* 82)

The translation from one code to another, especially to a numeric code, uncharged by emotions and existential meanings, makes evident the conventional nature of linguistic practices. Contemporary society, in Agnetti's reading, is committed to enthrall consumers with comfort: products are easy to understand and use, so no one questions their existence or functioning. Zeroing, on the other hand, by interrupting the transmission of a message, obliges viewers to pay attention to the workings of language and communication. For Agnetti the feeling of «not being at home» in society – triggered when viewers realize that things can work in unexpected ways – is the basis for every possible critical thought.

Language is the chief tool of zeroing because Agnetti used it to provide an extensive explanation of each piece, which prevents viewers from being so shocked by their disrupted expectations that they become intellectually paralyzed. The demystification of communication is achieved not avoiding communication, but through a critical use of the means of communication itself; in Agnetti's words, «a demystification with the weapons of mystification itself». (Agnetti, *Tradotto* 18) Agnetti's critique is not directed to language as a human practice, but to language as an instrument of power, through its uninterrupted flow and use of mechanisms that occult its constructed and ideological nature.

Such practice, in which the artist defines the intention of the artwork as part of the artwork itself, immediately evokes conceptual art. Agnetti was well informed about the development of international conceptualism, even if he was hesitant to consider himself part of it. In 1974, Agnetti wrote a very detailed article on the work of the Art and Language group and other conceptual artists, in which he included himself among the artists who operate a criticism of disciplines through the use of other disciplines, like Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Daniel Buren, and Arakawa.⁸ Agnetti's work includes other aspects that are congruent with what Joseph Kosuth, Hans Haacke and the Art and Language group were doing at the time. For instance, he used the tools of philosophy and logical analysis to challenge the operations of ordinary language and the unquestioned assumptions of the art system, and Agnetti employed paradox and irony to make visible the limits and constructed nature of institutions.

However, Agnetti also underlined the differences between his practice and that of other conceptualists. Of paramount importance for him was that he used only his texts, not material written by philosophers. In this way, Agnetti included his thought-process,

⁸ Agnetti, «Da: in allegato vi trasmetto un audiotape dalla durata di 40 minuti» 24-31.

his own analysis of a philosophical concept, as the material of the work.⁹ Secondly, while Gillo Dorfles termed Agnetti a «cold conceptualist» (*Il divenire della critica* 214), that is, an artist who employed language to question linguistic practice and who primarily appealed to the rationality of the viewer, other critics like Achille Bonito Oliva, Giorgio Verzotti and Renato Barilli have underlined the emotional aspect of Agnetti's work.¹⁰ Indeed, Agnetti's criticism regarded not only the internal logic of language, but also how the organization of disciplines and institutions impacts on human psychology and emotional life. That is the reason why most of Agnetti's artworks demand an active participation on the part of the viewer. Furthermore, contrarily to other conceptualists, Agnetti eschewed tautology and hermeticism: he avoided producing solipsistic artworks, and he constantly connected the practice of art with other social facts. Agnetti considered the use of objects in art as a necessary evil:

It is possible to construct other objects with conceptual value, different from a painting, but it is easy for them to become an end in themselves, for those who haven't been introduced to the whole mechanism that has motivated them. With a written text, on the other hand, it is easier to fabricate a conceptual discourse, that is, with a propositional beginning that arrives to an effect that can be fabricated also by the observer. (Agnetti, *Dimentica* 27)

For Agnetti the object was a mnemonic aid that made sure spectators repeated in their thought-process the steps that the artist had taken to produce the artwork, and reached the same conclusions. Therefore, the theory that underlines Agnetti's work originated, but did not replace, the artistic practice: he feared that otherwise there would be no impact of art on life.

3. Gillo Dorfles and Umberto Eco: Estrangement and Consumer Culture

While coming from different theoretical backgrounds – the Russian formalists on one side, the Hegelian tradition on the other – Gillo Dorfles and Umberto Eco mostly agreed on their diagnosis of contemporary culture, and their interpretations of estrangement complemented each other. Both interpreted alienation dialectically, with a negative and a positive meaning; for Eco and Dorfles, industrial society is responsible for the estranged identity of contemporary people, but it is also through estranging artistic techniques that a more authentic experience can be recuperated. Their analyses allow us to understand the intellectual milieu in which Agnetti's work developed, and also the theoretical sophistication of his exploration of estrangement.

Gillo Dorfles theoretical reference was the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky. In Shklovsky's work, *ostranenie* («making strange») refers to those literary strategies (use of unusual or foreign terms, breaking of narrative order, and rupture of syntax) that surprise the reader because they put into question expectations regarding how a poem, a story or a novel is. In this way, *ostranenie* impedes the viewer's distracted reception. However, it should not astound readers such that they become incapable of understanding the literary piece, but only challenge them to attend to their aesthetic processes. Against the au-

⁹ See Peruzzi: «[Kosuth and Weiner] limit themselves to do simple indicative actions, presenting texts written by others, usually linguists and structuralists. On the contrary, I only use my thoughts, I present works that make text on their own, that, like Adorno says, stimulate the dilatation of a concept».

¹⁰ See Bonito Oliva and Verzotti 28; Barilli 118.

tomatism of perception, which for Shklovsky represented a form of enslavement, *ostranenie* made it possible to attend to cognitive processes and therefore to revolutionize the interaction between the subject and the world.¹¹

Dorfles's initial engagement with the notion of aesthetic estrangement appeared in his 1958 book *Le oscillazioni del gusto e l'arte moderna*, but he developed this concept in *Artificio e natura* (1968) and finally completed his theory in *L'intervallo perduto* (1980). Dorfles revised Shklovsky's theory, and in his analysis *ostranenie* is no longer rooted in the aesthetic dimension, but becomes a pressing anthropological necessity. For Dorfles the intervals, breaks and pauses are fundamental elements of human experience, as our perceptual and mental structure necessitates intermissions between experiences, events, and things in order to comprehend and classify them. However, perceptual experiences in contemporary society are over-burdened by stimuli, with no time to process and analyze them.

Therefore, for Dorfles, the answer to the uninterrupted flux of information and perception in contemporary society is to introduce in art interfering strategies that would distance the viewers from their alienated experiences:

Art becomes that artificial phenomenon (opposed to the «naturalness» of our perceptions) through which objects, sounds and the phenomena of the external world adopt a different status from the one they normally have. To subtract them from the «automatism» of perception it is necessary to use the procedure of *ostranenie*. (Dorfles, *L'intervallo perduto* 77)

In consequence, art becomes the realm where perception can be re-trained to pay attention to stimuli, instead of processing them unreflectively. Dorfles mentions the introduction of extra-artistic elements, the assemblage of dissimilar fragments, or the rupture of linearity and narrative as the diastematic techniques that disconcert viewers and oblige them to pause and re-think their perceptual habits. Another group of estranging techniques, which relate not to the structure of the artwork but to its relation with its setting, involve the presence of art in an unexpected context, or the alteration of the usual interaction between viewer and work of art. All these strategies allow the spectator to notice the difference between the artwork and normal consumer goods, avoiding its dissolution into the realm of regular events and perceptions.

Agnetti's work employed these two classes of diastematic techniques, usually activating them in the same artwork. Agnetti put perceptual and theoretical habits under attack, by recurrently evoking an element of surprise through the use of non-sense, contradictions, paradoxes, or alteration of machines. This, in turn, emphasizes the distinction between artworks and normal objects, because even when Agnetti's point of departure was a regular book, calculator or gramophone, after his intervention it was no longer routinely usable. Therefore, both for Agnetti and for Dorfles defamiliarization can have a positive value: the alienation caused by consumer society can be countered by estranging techniques that distance the viewers from their alienated experiences.

For his part, Umberto Eco evoked G.W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx's notions of alienation to analyze contemporary forms of discourse. In 1962 Eco published «Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà» (translated in English as «Form as Social Commitment»), where he analyzed the task of the artist in a moment of exasperated alienation such as contemporary capitalistic society. Following Hegel, Eco read alienation as an inevitable relation between humanity and its products, such that things always outpace the

¹¹ See Shklovsky and Watney.

producer, making it difficult to identify one's *own* product. Nonetheless, Eco agreed with Marx that the pathological aspects of alienation, such as complete estrangement from machines, acceptance of the domination of the industry over humanity, difficulty in establishing meaningful relationships with other beings, etc., are more pronounced under late capitalism.

Confronted with this situation, artists, writers and musicians generally adopt one of two attitudes. Either, like «beautiful souls», they choose complete isolation from the world of commodities, refusing to participate in relationships with things and human beings, or they pretend that there is still harmony between humanity, nature, and things. On the contrary, Eco called for the artist to communicate in a comprehensible language, engaging with other human beings, and at the same time to take distance from language, denouncing the estranging qualities of the systems of communication:

To understand the world, avant-garde art delves into it and assumes its critical condition from within, adopting, to describe it, the same alienated language in which it expresses itself. But by giving this language a descriptive function and laying it bare as a narrative form, avant-garde art also strips it of its alienating aspects and allows us to demystify it [...] the artist tries to dislocate language from within, in order to escape from the situation and judge it from the outside. (Eco, "Form as Social Commitment" 141)

Artists, then, must not isolate themselves from social reality, as the only expressive means available to them are those society offers. Communication bereft of ideology and manipulation is an illusion, but it may be deployed critically, altering its form so that art «eludes the situation and controls it». (Eco, "Form as Social Commitment" 141) Therefore, in Eco's analysis as in Dorfles', aesthetic estrangement works as a tool to denounce the estrangement produced by ideological language, because it disrupts the ways in which the latter usually works.

Eco's article had a lasting influence on Italian art of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1967, Germano Celant reprised Eco's ideas in «Arte Povera. Notes for a Guerrilla War». Celant denounced the contemporary art system because it alienates the artists and obliges them to produce commodities; even when the artists reject the values of consumer society, they have to produce for the art market if they want to survive. According to Celant:

In a world dominated by inventions and technological imitations, one has but two alternatives: The first involves the assimilation (by kleptomania) of the system or its codified and artificial languages in a convenient dialogue with the existing social or individual structures.[...] The second alternative is the opposite of the first: the free self-projection of human activity. The first line of reasoning encourages a complex art, the second a poor art concerned with contingency, events, ahistoricism, the present [...] The latter prefers essential information. It does not dialogue with the system of society or with that of culture. [...] It is an asystematic way of existence, in a world in which the system is everything. (Celant 35)

Agnetti was a personal friend of Art Povera artists Mario and Marisa Merz, and Alighiero Boetti. He also exhibited with them in the exhibitions «Vitalità del negativo nell'arte italiana 1960-1970» (Roma, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 1970) and «Contemporanea» (Roma, Parcheggio di Villa Borghese, 1973). Agnetti agreed with the artists of Art Povera that the task of the artist was to denounce the alienation produced by consumer society through the use of unconventional means. However, Art Povera was committed

to recuperating what it considered to be an original form of experience, seeking the identification between man and nature by returning to natural and artisanal materials that evoked a pre-technological world. Eco had already ruled out the possibility that Celant suggested, calling it the option of the «beautiful soul» who considers the contemporary world as a menace to purity, and withdraws from it. Furthermore, Art Povera attempted to blur the distinction between life and art, which according to Eco prevents the necessary critical distance to judge both.

On the contrary, Agnetti's work aimed to prepare the viewer to a more authentic interaction with the world not through impoverished experience but through enriched engagement. Art Povera's operative term was *deculturare*: «[Arte Povera] is a moment that tends towards deculturization, regression, primitiveness and repression, towards the pre-logical and pre-iconographic stage, towards elementary and spontaneous politics, a tendency towards the basic element in nature [...] and in life [...] and in behavior [...] to decrease intellectual control over experience». (Celant, *Art povera* 230).¹² Instead, Agnetti proposed a more intellectual relationship with life, to recuperate critical thinking and authentic experiences. Maurizio Calvesi has claimed that Agnetti's work expresses «the reasonable panic of technology and mass culture, experienced from within». (Calvesi 185). Like Eco had suggested, Agnetti did not seek a refuge from contemporary life, as Art Povera artists did, but aimed to criticize it while being part of it, through a non-alienated usage of its language, technology, and practices.

4. Interrupted processes: *La macchina drogata* and *NEG*

Agnetti utilized several zeroing strategies to reset language, science, technology, architecture and art back to their basic elements, and therefore to impede the absorption of the viewer into habit and automatism: the application of randomness and unpredictability in a regular mechanism; the use of paradoxical or contradictory language; the translation of a given discourse from one code to another; the alteration of machines. The latter strategy can be explained by evoking the notion of «interrupted processes», which Achille Bonito Oliva employed in his 1975 article «Procedimento Interrotto», one of the most perceptive readings of Agnetti's work to date. As the art critic remarked,

The artist, using the strategy of *interrupted processes*, de-alienates the medium [...] exploits it and thus truly penetrates the formative process, determining an information gap with regards of the use of technology which only art is capable of. The artist has understood that only when the identification with the medium is replaced with its dialectical use is it possible to de-alienate art, and make it engage in an unprecedented relationship with technology, in which the latter is only a tool of knowledge, while art is conscious and deliberate knowledge. (Bonito Oliva, «Procedimento interrotto» 137-138)

An example of such practice is *La macchina drogata*, which was first exhibited in the Milanese Galleria Cenobio Visualità in 1968. Agnetti altered an Olivetti Divisumma 14 calculator, so that letters, instead of numbers, were printed when the visitors pressed its buttons. Agnetti exhibited a text explaining the purpose of *La macchina drogata* in a very narrow corridor, which lead to a cubicle enclosed with a black sheet where the machine was ready to be used by the spectators. The printed sheets of the machine's work were

¹² See also Christov-Bakargiev 20.

recuperated and hanged on the wall, as documents of the artistic action of *La macchina drogata*. Many of them became other works of art such as *Aritmetica* (1969), *Oltre il linguaggio* (1969), *Cometa* (1969), *Semiosi* (1970), and *Apocalisse* (1970). Not only did viewers participate in operating the machine, but also the machine became a creator in its own right, producing more works of art.

Appearances alone do not show any difference between *La macchina drogata* and the assembly-line prototype of the Olivetti Divisumma 14. But Agnetti's alterations irretrievably compromised the machine's primary function, the production of numerical operations. Inoperable as a calculator, the appliance has acquired a new role as a work of art that produces other works of art. The tension between these two elements is productive, as the contradiction between the designated purpose of the device and its actual results de-structures the idea of efficient machines. The tension between the interrupted functioning of the machine and the interrupted sense of writing is never resolved; in Agnetti's words, the functioning of the machine and the written words are «two receptacles in one, crammed to swelling, to bursting. In short, an imperfect fact that tends to make the actual profit prevail upon the axiomatic one». (Agnetti, *Tradotto* 21)

This particular model of Olivetti calculator was the first machine to provide a quick way of performing the four basic arithmetic operations. It was first commercialized in 1945 and already out of date when Agnetti used it as a work of art, despite the fact that the public had precise expectations about its functioning because it was still fairly common in stores and offices. Seeing letters where numbers were expected stunned viewers and made them question their assumptions regarding how a calculator should work. In Agnetti's intentions, the experience of disrupted expectations would prepare viewers to distrust their mechanized patterns of thought and behavior.

Another example of interrupted processes is *NEG*, *Rivelatore di Pause*, or *Pausofono*, a stereophonic record player altered so that it allowed the public to listen to the pauses in music. When sounds were played, the machine inhibited the signal and nothing was heard. When there was silence, however, *NEG* emitted a white noise, allowing the spectator to listen to the «negative of music», namely the intervals between sound and sound. Thus, like *La macchina drogata*, *NEG* questioned the common belief that machines always act as the user expects them to.

NEG also brought to the foreground the positive value attributed to silence, and is another manifestation of Agnetti's polemic stance against the language of disciplines, and the bombardment of messages through the media. Nevertheless, while the machine reversed the regular functioning of gramophones, it still proceeded in a systematic and methodic way. Never nihilistic, Agnetti did not propose to substitute order with chaos, but to create an alternative order that viewers did not expect. Even if their functioning was altered, the machines continued to work in a calculated and predictable manner: *NEG* always emits white noise, *La macchina drogata* always substitutes letters with numbers.

NEG also criticized the commercialization of ideas in the capitalistic system, as the actual object was only the materialization of a process-based work. Agnetti presented the patent for a machine that would detect silences in Milan's Chamber of Commerce, and Paolo Consolandi, the noted art collector who was also the owner of the piece, notarized it. The bureaucratic procedure of registering a patent for such an object constituted the real artwork, as the altered gramophone was produced at a second moment, «a mental work documented by an objectual work». (Bonito Oliva and Verzotti 162).

The object *NEG* was exhibited next to its patent, another artwork titled *Il brevetto*, as the document that testified the intellectual process that led to its ideation. As Agnetti recorded in his manuscript notes,

With this work I tried to recreate a poetic of invention, or better, the drama of an inventor when he is finally able to register his invention. *Il brevetto* is a purely documental work that clearly overturns how performances operate. Indeed, with *Il brevetto* we already have the document, and then, maybe, the action, which is the object [*NEG*]. On the contrary, in performances the action takes place first, and then the document registers [the action].¹³

In summary, *NEG* not only upsets how gramophones usually work, but also the operations of the copyright system – as Agnetti did not have any intention of industrially producing the object he had registered – and the logic of performances. While in daily life to know how to use a medium entails predicting its functioning in a deterministic manner, Agnetti showed that the malfunctioning of objects could become a fertile moment for learning. By upsetting how machines, disciplines and practices normally function, Agnetti underscored their constructed nature. The medium is therefore not concealed as a fetish commodity but brought to the foreground, de-familiarizing the production and meaning of objects and, thereby, intervening in their passive reception and usage in consumer culture. Through the zeroing of practices and disciplines, Agnetti interrupted the process of transmission of a message, obliging viewers to attend to the workings of language and machines:

It is clear that feeding your neighbour with products made to measure for the hand, the wall, the tired mind, means to continue the psychological blackmail, totemic blackmail of the mass tasting.

Nothing else.

To alter instead the consumer goods, or better yet to degenerate something that has contributed to the fixing of a language, of an agreement by now discontinued, associated, exploited, means something quite different. At least it makes it easier to think it over, the hesitation in the face of the mystifying process. (Agnetti, *Tradotto* 18)

For Agnetti, hesitation, insecurity, and uncertainty are indispensable to become an autonomous, critically thinking subject. Interruption and hiatuses not only make viewers attend to their perceptions, but they also help them question current practices and develop their abilities to imagine alternatives. Furthermore, the emphasis on gaps, breaks and interruptions is another instance in which Agnetti distanced himself from the poetics of the *Azimuth* group, in particular the extremely meticulous and precise work of Enrico Castellani, whose laborious incisions created reliefs that activated a field of light and shade on the surface of the canvas. Castellani's repetitive patterns were organized according to principles that prohibited interruptions or alterations. On the contrary, Agnetti's work put stress on such systems and programs, pushing them to the breaking point to show how organization and order are not naturally given, but a human construction. By showing familiar objects functioning in unfamiliar ways, Agnetti's artistic practice prevents blind confidence in the regular workings of systems and practices and hence promotes critical and active thinking.

¹³ Vincenzo Agnetti, «Titolo: Il brevetto», unclassified notebook. Archivio Vincenzo Agnetti. Courtesy Bruna Soletti and Germana Agnetti.

By hindering the normal working of appliances, *La macchina drogata* and *NEG* question the apparently harmonic relationship between machines and users, a fundamental aspect of industrial capitalism that intensely concerned Eco, Dorfles and Agnetti. In their analysis, industrial design conceals the alienation of the worker from the machine by facilitating the use of the appliance. On the contrary, the prevailing tendency in the Milanese design industry of the 1960s was to render the machine as easy and pleasurable to use as possible. The object had to be both functional and attractive, or, as the title of an industrial design exhibit in the Milan Triennale of 1951 read, «The Form of the Useful».

However, Dorfles, Eco and Agnetti pointed out that through industrial design the machine's power over humanity is hidden; as a result of beauty and comfort, the worker forgets that she produces these objects by working in factories that alienate her through an automatic and de-skilled form of work. The diffusion of aesthetically beautiful and comfortable furniture, household goods, electrical appliances, etc. also promotes consumerism, creating false desires. These objects, by having relatively low prices and being within almost everyone's reach, avoid legitimate social resentment, encourage conspicuous consumption, and promote the creation of a mass market. Therefore, in Eco's words, «industrial power, by rendering our relationship to things and the world more pleasant, makes us forget that in fact we remain slaves». (Eco, "Form as Social Commitment" 128)

To denounce this situation, Eco envisioned a system that would put obstacles in the working of the machine, so that the worker, through her discomfort and awkwardness, adequately understood the opposition between her and the machine:

A paradoxical alternative project would be to devise instruments that would make our work as irksome as possible, so that we would never for a second forget that what we are producing is never going to be ours. Such an alternative, however, sounds more like the dream of a madman than like a viable solution. (Eco, "Form as Social Commitment" 127-128)

Thus, a form of genuine estrangement, the open antagonism between man and machine, substitutes the initial alienation, the obliviousness to the authentic workings of industrial power.

Six years after Eco's article, Agnetti put in practice this suggestion, with a similar purpose: it is no coincidence that the machines that Agnetti modified were produced by Olivetti and Brionvega, whose products are now icons of 1960s design. Rendering strange a supposedly predictable industrial process de-stabilizes viewers, and when they lose their ground they can, in Agnetti's intention, reflect on the practices they have taken for granted. The alienation provoked by the estrangement of workers from their labor is overthrown through diastematic techniques, which educate viewers to question their thinking habits.

«Zeroing» erases those mechanisms that weight down creative and revolutionary thought. It is not a destructive move, but a necessary work of selection and reflection on which aspects of inherited language and culture are still valid, and which ones we use just out of habit. In Charles Harrison's terminology, bourgeois art is that «which masked the material conditions of its production behind the seeming immaculateness and instantaneousness of its surface». (Harrison, *Essays* 11) On the contrary, Agnetti's altered machines, disrupted and inefficient, make visible their ideological and productive context. If industrial design aesthetizes the relationship between machine and human, and thus anesthetizes the latter to the latent injustice of the economic system, Agnetti's inter-

rupted machines display the intrinsic violence of industrial alienation and thus constitute the first step to overcome it.

Even if he lived through troublesome historical events, Agnetti did not explicitly take a stance for a particular party or social sector. Hence, at first sight, his use of estrangement does not seem to be committed to the radical political program that instead inspired Shklovsky's *ostranenie*. However, Agnetti's work could be read as a demarcation of a political space, which in and of itself constitutes a political act. To summon Mladen Dolar's formulation, Agnetti could be said to «circumscribe a site, a locus of the political, without ever quite stepping into this site itself. It is as if [he] describes and dissects the space of the political without ever quite engaging in politics; [he] displays the stuff that politics is made of without making politics of it» (Dolar 20).

In conclusion, Agnetti's work demonstrates «the stuff that the political is made of», namely how industrial power obscures its violence behind continuous communication and easy-to-use machines. Although Agnetti did not propose any solution to these problems, his artistic practice was not politically neutral, or as Dolar writes, «the circumscription of the site [...] requires a step » even if it does not «prescribe what this step should be» (Dolar 21). The emphasis in Agnetti's art on the interruption of the flux of communication, and the necessity of questioning the disciplinary use of language expressed his critique of the over-determination of consumer society. In opposition to industrial power and consumerism, Agnetti altered machines interrupted the automatic flux of communication in order to short-circuit that flow and thus facilitate the examination and critique of the status quo.

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(Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the author)

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